Canada falling short of climate goals: UN; Environment minister acknowledges that more needs to be done

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The world is going to blow past its most stringent climate goal in less than a quarter-century unless there is political will to act faster and more directly to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

That's the key message in a new report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which is expected to be released on Monday.

The report is expected to be a scientific blueprint for how the world can meet its climate change targets. However, it's expected to show that right now, the world is on track to warm up by 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels by 2040.

The world is currently warming up at about 0.2 C each decade, and has already warmed by more than 1 C compared to the mid-19th century.

The 2015 Paris Agreement set a goal to reduce emissions by the end of this century by enough to keep the world from warming up more than 2 C compared to pre-industrial times. But there was also a stronger goal of 1.5 C. Catherine Abreu, executive director of Climate Action Network Canada, said the difference between 1.5 C and 2 C may not seem like much, but it is "huge" when it comes to climate change.

Carbon Brief, a British website focused on climate science and policy, reviewed 70 peer-reviewed climate studies. Based on that, it estimated on Friday that at 1.5 C of warming, global sea levels will rise an average of 48 cm - but at 2 C, that figure goes to 56 cm.

The group also estimated that the chance of having an ice-free summer in the Arctic rises to 16 per cent at 2 C of warming from 3 per cent at 1.5 C. And the frequency of extreme rainfall events in eastern Canada will go up 26 per cent at 1.5 C, and 55 per cent at 2 C.

Next year, the signatories to the Paris accord are supposed to take stock of progress in meeting their national emissions goals. Canada is aiming by 2030 to curb emissions to 30 per cent below what they were in 2005. A year ago, Canada told the UN that it was 66 million tonnes shy of that goal, despite all the policies and programs in place or planned. That's about what 14.5 million cars emit in a single year.

In a recent interview with The Canadian Press, federal Environment Minister Catherine McKenna said she knows the report will say that "we're not on track to be hitting 1.5 degrees."

"We acknowledge this and we all know we need to do more," she said. "That's why the Paris agreement is set up the way it is. Every country in the world needs to take action and then we need to be more ambitious about the action we are willing to take."

But Canada has no immediate plans to increase its own goals. Instead, the focus is on implementing the current plans, which include a national price on carbon, eliminating coal-fired power plants, making homes and businesses more energy efficient, and investing in clean-technologies and renewable energy.

Blair Feltmate, head of the Intact Centre on Climate Adaptation at the University of Waterloo, said the UN report may "serve as a wake-up call" for some governments. But he said he was a bit disheartened at a recent meeting of the G20 climate group in Argentina, where he found most countries were committed to cutting emissions, but only "at their own pace without affecting their economies."

"Effectively, what they're saying is the probability of them living up to what they committed to under the Paris accord is negligible to zero," he said.

The takeaway for Canadians in the report should be the need to not just accelerate emissions cuts, but also to accelerate efforts to protect their homes and businesses from the floods, forest fires and storms that climate change is already bringing with more frequency and more force than before, he said.

The report comes just days after German environmental non-profit Urgewald published its latest update on the world's addiction to coal. That report says there are 1,380 new coal plants being planned or already in development in 59 countries around the world. If they're all built, the amount of electricity produced from coal will grow by one-third.

Urgewald lists six Canadian financial companies among the top 100 investors in new coal plants, including the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board.

Canada announced last week it is moving forward with a $40-billion liquefied natural gas project in British Columbia. Although many environmentalists don't want more natural gas produced or burned either, exporting it to places like China to replace some of its coal will help emissions go down.

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